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MODERN HISTORY

No.5 The Making of the State of Israel

by

Richard Crossman

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1. ANNOUNCER: History. Our programme today is a recorded interview with Mr. Richard Crossman, O.B.E., member of Parliament for Coventry East, on the making of the State of Israel.
  2. INTERVIEWER: Mr. Crossman, we're very glad to welcome you to this series of Modern History programmes. So often we have to reconstruct what it was like to be present on the great occasions of modern history, because it isn't possible to bring to the microphone men like yourself who actually took part in the events we're studying. But we heard from Commander Kerans himself about his experiences in China in 1949, and today we should like to hear from you about Israel, because you actually saw Israel in the making and know its first Prime Minister well. We've called this programme "The Making of the State of Israel". This implies that Israel is in some way an artificial state. Do you think that is right?

- 2 -

1. CROSSMAN: Well it isn't artificial if you mean by that that the Israelis are an artificially made nation, because nobody is more genuine a nation than the Israelis. But it is true that the State was constructed new, fresh in 1948. It's a mysterious thing, you know; it's the only one like it. Here were the Jews who, 2,000 years ago, were driven from their country at the fall of the Temple and they lived among the Gentiles and they retained in some mysterious way their Jewishness - their sense of being a nation in exile from Zion (Zion of course, is the name for Jerusalem). And then at the end of the last century a number of them felt this exile physically; felt that they wanted to return and make a Jewish State in what was then Turkish Palestine. And so at the end or middle of World War I the British Government at the time made a famous declaration that we were to make room for a Jewish national home while providing and guarding and safeguarding the rights of the Arab inhabitants, and that I don't think anybody then guessed what a terrible problem we would face in trying to reconcile those two objectives.

2. INTERVIEWER: Do all the Jews want to go back, Mr. Crossman?

3. CROSSMAN: Oh no. No, no, Take America: now in America there are what? some 3,000,000 Jews and I think the number of American Jews who've gone to Israel is a couple of thousand.

- 3 -

1. CROSSMAN: It's the Jews of Eastern Europe who really wanted to go because they had no democratic rights at all. Broadly speaking the Western Jews have supplied the money and the brains for the settlement of Israel, whereas the mass of people who felt homeless, who felt Jews because they weren't allowed to be Russians, they weren't allowed to be Poles, they were treated as outcasts, most of them living in Eastern Europe - the survivors of them, let's say.
2. INTERVIEWER: Why do you say survivors, Mr. Crossman?
3. CROSSMAN: Because 6,000,000 of them had been exterminated by Hitler. You see, they'd all been dragged from their homes into ghettos, and then dragged from the ghettos to the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, where I on the Anglo-American Commission when we arrived in that ghastly winter of 1946 - one of the coldest winters I know - we made our tour through Europe. I remember seeing these ghastly ... I went to Dachau, saw the piles of the corpses, saw the survivors, talked to them. About a hundred thousand people penned up in the D.P. centres.
4. INTERVIEWER: What is D.P.?
5. CROSSMAN: Oh, Displaced Persons. These are the people Hitler dragged into slave labour and when the Nazis collapsed there was the slave labour, the few survivors left. A hundred thousand in the camps. And then perhaps 60,000 in Poland. Poor people. And the terrible thing was we, as a Commission, demanded what Western country would receive these hundred thousand survivors? Not one Western country. Not one.

- 4 -

1. CROSSMAN: These people, of course, wanted to throw the dust of Europe, the extermination centres, off their feet; they wanted to get out to a country of their own. And Hitler was perhaps the greatest/<sup>creator</sup> of Zionism. Every survivor of Hitler became in his innermost nature somebody who said "Never will I live in Europe. I want a country of my own, where no-one can exterminate me, and I can fight for myself." And so they came in, pouring in, with an entirely new spirit and the unfortunate British were faced with the conflict between the Jewish nationalism streaming in from Europe - the survivors and the Arabs saying: "This is our country. We also have the right to complete independence. We want to throw the Jews into the sea."

2. INTERVIEWER: But that was a most terrible situation for the British officials. Sometimes it's said that they showed too much sympathy with the Arabs and too little with the Jews. What do you think about that?

3. CROSSMAN: Well, of course, I'm prejudiced because, as you said at the beginning I was in on the foundations of the Jewish State. I would say yes, it's true that the British Colonial officials who were running it then showed a pro-Arab bias. And I want to say why they did. You see, we made the officials move, as you know, from colony to colony. Now, most of them came to Palestine, this very difficult place for the Jews and Arabs, from a term in Tanganyika, or in West Africa. Now what had been their job there?



- 5 -

1. CROSSMAN:  
(Cont'd)

To defend the African against the white settler. To make sure that the people of the country, the native, had his rights. So when the British Colonial official came to Palestine his instinct was to help the native Arab against the Jewish white settler, and this made them, I think for quite decent reasons, instinctively resent the coming of the European white settler, as they saw the Jew. And there was a second reason actually, too. The Arab was a person who was inclined to bow to you and look up to the English and say "Thank you very much". I'm afraid the Jews were not prepared to say "Thank you very much", or to look up to us. They regarded themselves as equals; they regarded the Colonial officials as an insult; they wanted to run the country -- and of course, they were capable. They were some of the cleverest, ablest, most civilised people. They didn't want a nice Colonial tutelage; they wanted a State of their own.

2. INTERVIEWER:

Well, you've said you're prejudiced on that Mr. Crossman. You see, I have to ask whether you are or not, because in this series we're dealing with the events which have not yet been sorted out and put into school textbooks, so our listeners have pamphlets and notes in front of them produced by the BBC. But even they were difficult to write. To check some of the facts the writer rang someone he knew who had been a Government official in Palestine in 1948, at this difficult time we've been talking about, and asked him for a statement on which the Arabs and Israelis would agree.

- 6 -

1. INTERVIEWER: He just laughed and said that they would never  
(Cont'd) agree to accept the same story. What do you think? Was he right?
2. CROSSMAN: Well, that's completely true. It's a tragic fact, but even on something like the factual history of what happened there is an Arab version and a Jewish version. And there's no doubt what I shall say to you will be much nearer the Jewish version than the Arab. Though I, of course, try and be objective. But you know, if you're a participant in the world it's a great fallacy to believe that objectivity consists in being neutral; in being equidistant from both sides. You can't be that; that's just being without principles. The best you can be, if you're engaged, is to know your prejudices and try and make allowances. Now, all I can do is to know that I'm prejudiced in favour of the Israeli and therefore to be scrupulously careful, if I can, to put the other point of view. And I want to put it to you now. If I had been an Arab, watching <sup>Jews</sup> these/come in, I would have felt exactly like the Arabs and said; "This is my country. It doesn't matter if they were here 2,000 years ago. I don't know why the Europeans should put these confounded Jews here. Why don't they have them in America, in England?" I should have said, "Why do they shove them into my country?" I felt, when I was in Palestine, if I'd been a Jew I'd have been a Zionist. If I'd been an Arab, I'd have been an Arab, because both sides ... both sides were right. You know, the worst problems in the world are when both sides are right.

- 7 -

1. INTERVIEWER: Thank you for being so frank. Obviously, there wouldn't be any history if people didn't disagree and sometimes disagree violently. But life isn't all politics, is it? What also interests us about the making of Israel is the way they have made the desert blossom like the rose, as it says in the Bible. Could you tell us about that? On the map it looks as though half the territory of Israel was desert. What are they doing about this Southern desert, the Negev.

2. CROSSMAN: Well look, before we go onto that we'd better just conclude this ... the actual events between the Arabs and the Jews. You see, what happened was the British threw their hand in. We had so much trouble we handed the problem over to the U.N. The U.N. sent out another commission - I think it was the 16th commission - to study Palestine; they proposed a partition of it, into an Arab State and a Jewish State, and they drew frontiers. The Arabs then rejected the United Nations report and invaded the country. Six Arab armies marched in - the Egyptians from the South, the Lebanese from the North, the Iraqi and the Jordanians what are now, and the Saudi Arabians from the East. Six armies advanced to destroy the half million Jews. And then came the tremendous - I can't help it - the War of Liberation in which the Jews drove these Arab armies out. They had absolutely nothing to start with; they equipped themselves, they fought. And, as a result of the Arabs trying to undo the United Nations frontiers the Jews got a State one-third bigger, as a matter of fact, than what was allocated to them by U.N.

- 8 -

1. CROSSMAN:  
(Cont'd) And the present frontiers are not, of course, the U.N. frontiers, they're the armistice lines. This so often happens; the temporary armistice lines have hardened into the frontiers between the Jewish and their bitterly hostile Arab neighbours all round.
2. INTERVIEWER: I see. So we must regard it, then not as a war that has finished, but only a war that's held up.
3. CROSSMAN: I think it's the most terrible frontier I've ever seen. A frontier of hatred. Not hatred on the Jewish side, to be fair; the Jews, I think, genuinely do want to be at peace with the Arabs - they have everything to gain by the peace, because they're absolutely cut off from the Middle East and the whole way along this frontier there are guards on both sides, except where the U.N. in the tiny Gaza strip in the South has got its soldiers. The rest of it is a frontier of permanent hostility, permanent raiding and in Jerusalem - right through the Holy City, right through, jagged, street by street - armed men stand. The City is split exactly where the fighting stopped when the armistice came. It's a terrible frontier.



- 9 -

1. INTERVIEWER: But behind this terrible frontier I suppose things were peaceful enough for people to get on with the job of earning a living from the soil. Can you tell us about that?
2. CROSSMAN: Oh yes. Behind the frontier there's one of the most wonderful things in the world - the development of Jewish Palestine and Israel. You see, the Jews had been forced in their period of exile to live in cities; they'd been forbidden in most places to live in the land and people had got the idea they could only be hucksters or shopkeepers. So the Zionists said "We are going to show that we can till the soil" The greatest philosophy of Zionism is his passionate belief that the Jews must show themselves farmers. And out there there has been a miraculous achievement in developing agriculture under very difficult conditions. I mean, their cows, to be honest.....in Israel, despite all the difficulties, the average production of an Israeli cow is greater than that of an English cow in terms of milk. And they've developed this in the most difficult climates. In the Jordan Valley they live in something which is really tropical. Up in the top of the Galilee Mountains it can be quite cold, then there's the sweltering, humid heat of the Tel Aviv plain, and in all these areas, where under the Turks there was virtually no agriculture, there is now the most wonderful orange groves, there is cotton, there is bananas, and there is also wheat in the open field, in what was once desert.

- 10 -

1. CROSSMAN: It really is wonderful.  
(contd.)
2. INTERVIEWER: That is an extraordinary variety in such a small area. Would you say the area is about the size of Wales?
3. CROSSMAN: Well, the total area is the size of Wales, but of that, of course, what was thought the cultivatable area was about a third of the size of Wales.  
Yes, it's staggering. And that brings me to the other thing I wanted to tell you about,  
which is, of course, that over half the area was desert and the Jews realised that if they want to settle - they've already trebled the population from 600,000 to nearly .....just under 2,000,000 - if they want to have another 1,000,000 in, as they do, they have to deal with the desert in the South, the Negev, and they're having tremendous plans. They've built atomic reactors there, they've built a port down Eilat.
4. INTERVIEWER: Where is Eilat?
5. CROSSMAN: Right on the bit of the Red Sea which runs up to Akaba in the extreme South, just where King Solomon's mines were, and where the Queen of Sheba came across and landed when she came up - she landed at Eilat. And his mines were ten miles north of Eilat, and they're being mined again today by the new Israelis. Tremendously exciting, yes.
6. INTERVIEWER: Yes, they must be very proud of that.
7. CROSSMAN: Then at the Dead Sea, they're getting potash out of the Dead Sea. And at Sodom and Gomorrah now is a nice potash production plant.

- 11 -

1. CROSSMAN: They really do, as you say, make the desert grow. And I think just as remarkable as this development of the land is what they're doing to people. Now you see, they've brought in people from 53 countries, and these Jews- there are black Jews, there are yellow Jews, there are Jews from Europe, there are Jews from the Orient, all as different from each other as the nations they belonged to. Now, they've had to be integrated into a single nation, and these children brought, some from millionaires' homes, some from towns, some from the miserable slums of Iraq, are taken - and some, of course, from the concentration camps - are taken and integrated into this nation. You talk about America as a melting-pot, well, Israel is the greatest melting-pot, and out of all these different Jews they create young Israeli - they call them Sabra. The word Sabra is used, it means, of course, the cactus, because the young Israeli isn't a soft townsman, he isn't a person from the Bronx or Whitechapel, he's as tough as anyone and he has fair hair and blue eyes mostly.
2. INTERVIEWER: And he grows in the desert.
3. CROSSMAN: And he grows like a prickly cactus and he's able to defend his own country. Now, that's....that's it; that's Israel today. It's a tough, progressive country.
4. INTERVIEWER: Who would you say were the chief men behind this extraordinary development? He

- 12 -

1. CROSSMAN: I don't think any Israeli would doubt it when I say the founders of Israel were two men - Chaim Weizmann and David Ben Gurion, and I've the privilege of knowing them both. Indeed, I can say that Weizman was very fond of me and I had the good fortune to be able to see him as an old man and really talk to him privately. They're wonderfully contrasting types. Both of them, by way, came from Eastern Europe, from Russia. Weizmann was the son of a little Jewish pedlar at a little village called Motel, near Pinsk, and he as a young man, ambitious, came to Germany, studied science, went to Switzerland where he met Lenin, and he fought with Lenin because he was a Zionist and Lenin was a Communist.
2. INTERVIEWER: You mean fought with words.
3. CROSSMAN: Fought with words. Fought and debated among the students.
4. INTERVIEWER: In Geneva, was it?
5. CROSSMAN: Yes, fighting for the Jewish students there, whether they should line up as Communists, or line up as Zionists. And then he moves, Weizmann, to England where he got a lectureship at Manchester and he invented a very famous scientific process that helped to win World War I. Became a friend of Lloyd George, who was then Minister of Munitions, because he invented a type of explosive which the Admiralty needed and this is one of the reasons why he got the Balfour Declaration. So he was that type; tall, distinguished, brilliant, intellectual, diplomatist.



- 13 -

1. CROSSMAN:  
(contd.)

Then the other fellow, David Ben Gurion, couldn't be more different. Tiny, hair sticking out, a gnome, .....like a dwarf, tough; he's no diplomat. He arrived in Israel as a boy. He was a labourer. He had to dig in a collective farm - you had to have a rifle on your back to keep the Arabs off. He fought. He worked in orange groves, he became a leader of the Jewish Labour Movement, and he organised the Haganah which was the Jewish irregular army which fought the Arabs, then fought the British. And whereas Weizmann tried to work with us he said "The British must go if they don't give us our independence." Weizmann was the Moses, the Prophet who died on Pisgah, and David Ben Gurion is the Joshua, who fought the battles, and who has done the actual development of the country. The moment World War II came he lined up behind Britain and said "We must fight Hitler, and of course unite with Britain." But the moment the war ended he was at it again, demanding independence for his people. He organised the Haganah, he organised the war against the Arabs in 1948, and of course he organised the second war - the Sinai war - in 1956, you remember, when the Israelis went into Nasser's country to destroy Nasser's army and got mixed up with the Suez affair. But I wasn't only thinking of military battles. He fought against the desert; he's been the man who stimulated, who spoke for the young Sabra I talked to you about.

- 14 -

1. CROSSMAN:  
(CONTD.)

They feel this very old - he's over 70 now - but the young Israelis feel that this David Ben Gurion is their man, he's got eternal youth and vigour and this belief in conquering the desert. This is all his inspiration. Personally I get a little anxious sometimes; I hope that they will get peace with the Arabs soon, because to be permanently in a state of war isn't good, even for a small country. They need peace. They need to put aside the arts of war. And if only we could break down this frontier, if only we could get them to live side by side with the Arabs, then the whole Middle East would be helped by this wonderful Jewish experiment which at present is absolutely cut off from its neighbours. It should be fructifying the Middle East; it's now isolated from the Middle East. And I believe David Ben Gurion would agree when I say: "Look, let him cease to be a man of war and a fighter, because what we need is peace in that part of the world."

2. INTERVIEWER: Swords into ploughshares for the future.

3. CROSSMAN: Swords into ploughshares.

4. INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much, Mr. Crossman.

5. ANNOUNCER: And that ends History for today. Mr. Richard Crossman, O.B.E., Member of Parliament for Coventry East, was being interviewed by Stephen Usherwood. The programme in this series next week will be on Egypt 1945-61. And that ends School Broadcasting for today.